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# Yellamma Cult and Divine Prostitution: Its Historical and Cultural Background

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***Abstract-*** The worship of Renuka, the mother goddess can be seen in many places of India. In the southern parts of India, Renuka is worshipped in the name of Yellamma or Mariamma. Renuka, as mentioned in Puranas is the mother of Parasurama who according to Indian mythology is considered as the incarnation of Visnu and his cult also can be seen in many parts of India. But in the regions of Vindhya Mountains, worship of Renuka gets predominance. Although Renuka is considered as the mother of Parasurama in epics and Puranas, there are mythical stories, which made her a mother goddess. The rise of Renuka as a mother goddess was perhaps the result of a complex process including the merges of numerous personalities and myths. In south Indian regions like Andhra and Karnataka, there are many stories related to Renuka and she is being worshipped as Yellamma or Mariamma. The main thing to be noted in this cult is that Renuka has been more popular among the lower castes rather than among the Brahmanical groups. This may be due to the reason that the development of this cult largely occurred in the regions dominated by pastoral communities, who have several other deities with similar mythical structures. One of the interesting features in southwestern India is that the ritual performed by the community of Devadasis is associated with Renuka shrines. In this study an attempt is made to analyse how Devadasi system/prostitution is connected with the Renuka/Yellamma cult in and around Soundatti. The historical and cultural background of prostitution becoming divine in nature also will be examined.

***Index Terms-*** Cult, Mariamma, Muttu, Parasurama, Prostitution, Renuka, Yellamma

## I. Introduction

Followers of many religions in India as other civilizations worship many gods and goddess as a part of their culture. These gods and goddesses are mostly worshipped by a group of people who are gathered in a place by building an abode such as temples, shrines beneath any tree or above any platform with or without roof. These people consider the deity of the concerned place as their own guardian deity or the one who protects the village from illness and who helps them in their prosperity and goodness of their place.

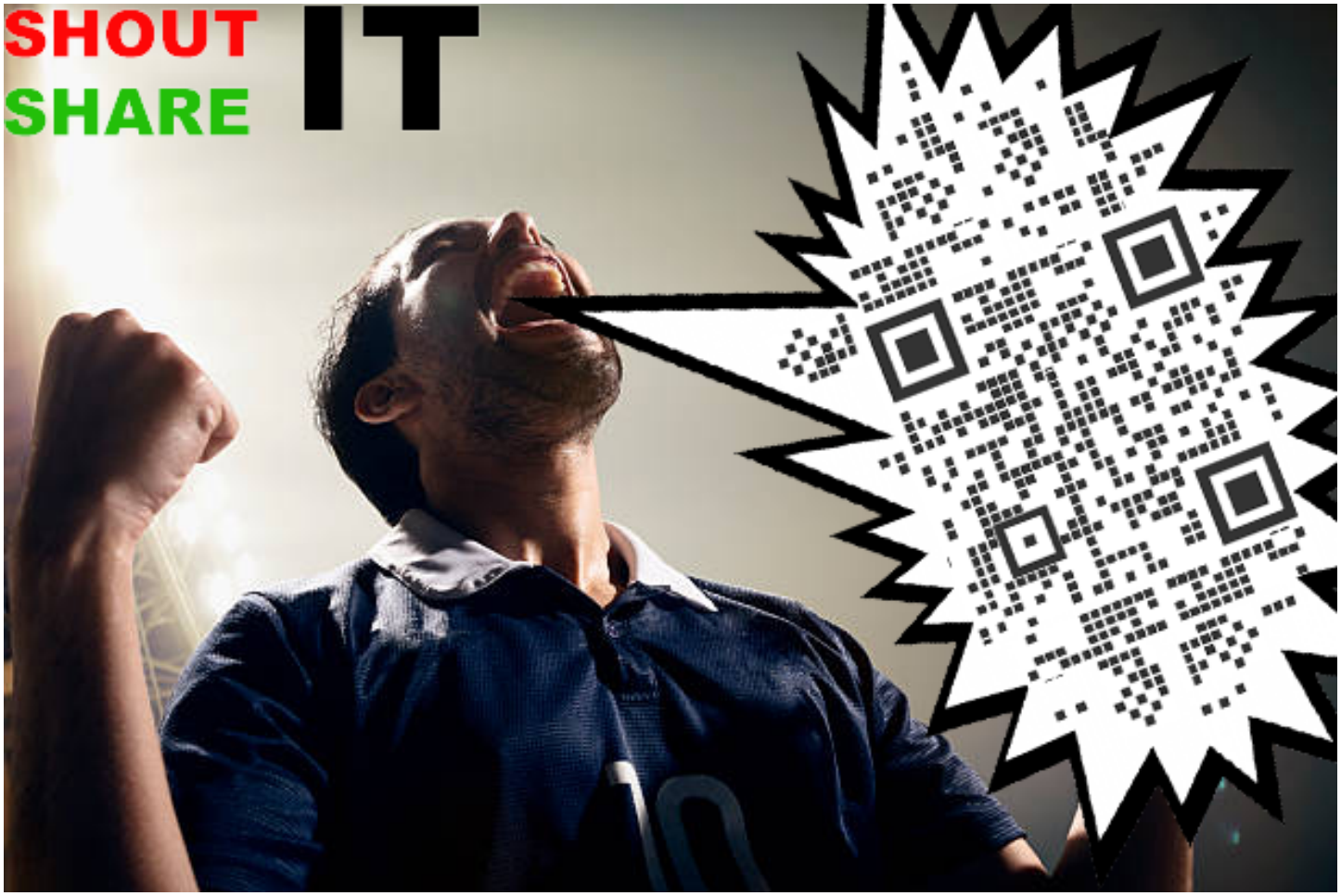
Though in many places, male gods predominate the settlement, there will be a goddesses in most of the villages as the village deity, also can be called as local deity or *Gramadevata*. Though there will be 'great gods' such as *Visnu* and *Siva* as the deities in the villages, there will also be a *Gramadevata* who is considered as one who protect of the village from evil and bad happenings, often these village deities will share the names the deities from the Sanskritised form and will be identified with these deities. This is not necessarily meant that village deity or local deity does not bear any similarities to the 'great gods'[i]. In most cases where such identification exists the *Gramadevata* differs obviously from the 'Great' deity with whom it shares a name.

## II. Village Goddesses of South India

A number of goddesses are worshipped in and around villages of South India. They all have several similar characteristics such as they mostly will be female who guard the village, represented by any uncarved stone, tree or a small statue in a small shrine, having direct association with the villagers, non Brahmin priests, curing disease, calming calamities etc. Mostly their names end with '*Amman*' or simply '*Amma'* meaning mother. Almost all these goddesses have same kind of myth, cult and worship in one or the other way. Even though there are many types of village goddesses worshipped in the villages of south India, all these seems to have a common base for their origin based on the *Renuka* myth described in *Puranas* or any other stories mostly having connection with this myth. It is also notable that, those goddesses who do not have direct connection will connection with it in the origin or that deity or having the same theme as explained in the *Renuka* myth.

## III. Renuka Myth in Mahabharata and Other Puranas

*Renuka* is famous as the wife of *Jamadagni* and the mother of *Parasurama*. The earliest references to *Renuka* occur in *Mahabharata* at two places. One is in *Anusasanaparva*,where the origin of sandals and umbrella[ii] and another is in *Vanaparva* where *Renuka*'s death and her rejuvenation is explained.[iii] According to the second episode, *Jamadagni* had five sons named *Rumanvan*, *Susena*, *Vasu*, *Visvavasu* and *Parasurama*. When all these went outside, *Renuka* after getting permission of *Jamadagni* went to bath in a river. While returning, she saw *Citraratha* the king of *Martikavarta* sporting in the water along with his wife. This made her into a mood for sport. She became pale and shame after seeing this. In this condition she reached the hermitage. *Jamadagni* after noticing her and her situation knew what happened to her and came to a conclusion that she had done a sin. As the sons returned to hermitage, he ordered the sons one by one to kill *Renuka* by beheading her. The first four disobeyed. When *Parasurama* was ordered, he obeyed it and beheaded his mother. *Jamadagni* was satisfied. Pleased with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*Parasurama*, *Jamadagni* asked him to demand boons he desired. *Parasurama* asked six boons. 1)Mother should come back to life, 2)his brothers should be again made into human beings, 3)all should forget this incident happened, 4)he should be free from the sin of matricide, 5)no one should defeat him and 6) a long life. All this was granted by *Jamadagni*. The same incident is narrated in various Puranas too like as in *Brahmandapurana*, *Visnupurana*, *Skandapurana* etc but with some slight variations.

## IV. Origin and Development of Renuka Cult

From the story mentioned above and myth narrated in many Puranas, it is clear that *Renuka* was just considered as a woman who became entirely submissive to her husband and as the mother of *Parasurama*. But now *Renuka* is worshipped as goddesses in many places especially in and around the part of Maharastra, Andhra, Karnataka and Tamilnadu. The reason behind this is clearly the mythical stories and narratives emerge or perhaps made in many places of South India.

In one of the famous story in south India is as follows. Here *Renuka* is a chaste woman and because of his power of chastity, she did not require any container or jar to fetch water. She could hold water in her palm like a ball and after her bath the cloth would flap and get dried in the air above her head, following her as she walked. Once after the bath in the river, she saw few *Gandharva*s sporting in the mid region in the water ball at her hand. Immediately she looked upon this for a moment. The next moment, the solid water ball started diminishing and got sprinkled on the ground the cloth overhead also stopped getting dry. She came to know that because she saw the *Gandharva*s sporting overhead and because of her desire, lost the power of chastity. When she reached the hermitage saw her husband with anger asked about the water ball missing and about the wet cloth. *Jamadagni* ordered *Parasurama* to take her to forest and cut her head. On the way *Renuka* saw an out caste woman passing nearby. She for protecting *Renuka*, helped her. *Parasurama* tried to separate them but was unable to do so. *Parasurama* gave a severe blow with his axe to cut his mother's head but due to strength both of the women's head got cut. After that he straightly went to *Jamadagni* and because of gladness he asked *Parasurama* to ask a boon. *Parasurama* asked the renewal of his mother's life. *Jamadagni* gave him some water to him and said that when the head was fixed to the body of the dead one, should sprinkle that water to the head and so *Renuka* will rejuvenate. *Parasurama* reached near her mother's corpse and in hurry he joined the heads wrongly i.e. his mother's head onto body of that other woman and the other woman's head onto body of his mother. They both got rejuvenated. When this news reached the people around the area, due to surprise, all of them started worshipping those women as goddesses. The one with the head of *Renuka* was named as Mariamma and other one came to be known as *Yellamma*.[iv] Another local version of this same story preserved by the devotees of *Renuka* is thus. Here a woman belonging to Mang community[v] took pity on *Renuka* and because of this she stopped *Parasurama* from cutting the head of *Renuka*. Here also *Parasurama* cut the heads of both the women. According to a myth famous in Maharastra, when *Kartaviryarjuna* killed *Jamadagni* and wounded his wife *Renuka*, *Parasurama*, before taking revenge on Arjuna, decided to take the dead body of his father for doing funeral rituals. He found that Mahur near Sahyadri ranges as a proper place. *Renuka* decide to burn herself in funeral pyre and asked her son to leave the place. He left the place but after crossing over some distance, came back to save his mother but found that the entire body of *Renuka* except the head had burn. In that place itself the head of *Renuka* was worshipped by the local people considering her as the Sati Devi.

*Renuka* is worshipped in different parts of south India having different names in different regions. She is worshipsped as *Yellamma*, Ekavira, Yamai, Mariamma and so on. As these goddesses became popular with a particular name and particular place or region, various myths and folk stories gradually developed around the deity in that particular area. Such stories are found in the traditionally preserved literature including folk songs.

Through these stories it is very clear that the *Renuka* becomes goddess or attain divinity. This is because of head change incident in the first myth and due to the head remaining incident in the second one. *Renuka* is worshipped as *Yellamma* and as *Mariamma* in south Indian regions.

## V. Worship of Yellamma in Southern India

*Yellamma* is perhaps the most popular form of *Renuka* and is being worshipped throughout a very wide region covering Maharastra, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Though the identification of *Yellamma* with *Renuka* is doubtful, *Renuka* Sahasranama mentions the name '*Ellamba'* as one of the names of *Renuka*. N D Kambaley opines that *Renuka Ellamba* is the Sanskritised form of the word *Yellamma*. Besides this, according to myths popular among the devotees of *Yellamma*, such a marriage with *Jamadagni*, her death by her own son *Parasurama* etc., clearly speak of her clear identity with *Renuka*[vi]. The origin of *Yellamma* is explained in many ways:

a) Once *Renuka* went to Soundatti a place where regional language is Kannada. The people asked her "*Yella Amma*". In Kannda, '*Yella'* means 'Where' and '*Amma'* means 'Mother.' *Renuka* was associated with these two words and later came to be known as *Yellamma*
b) In Karnataka, the seven deities form important part of pantheon. They are known as '*Yollumma'* (Seven Mothers or *Saptamatrkas*). In Kannada *Yollu* means seven. So *Yellamma* may be regarded as a corrupt form of *Yollumma* i.e. seven mothers.
c) In another way *Yella* means all and *Amma* means mother. The word thus means the mother of all. This may be the probable etymology. In Tamil *Yella* means border of a village or any place. The temples of *Yellamma* are generally constructed or situated in the boarders of the village and she is supposed to be the protection force of that village. So this goddess got the name *Yellamma*.
d) There is another belief also that *Yellamma* represents mother earth. There is a peculiar rite performed on the full moon days coming between December and January and between March and April. The former full moon day is considered to the day of widow hood and the later

to be of begetting marital status. This ritual represents that by harvesting of corps, the earth loses its prosperity and this condition is thought to be similar to widowhood. Again in the *Caitra* month the spring starts with fresh blossom everywhere and this is supposed to be regaining the marital status. This rite is performed by the *Devadasi*s in the areas of Andhra Pradesh and Maharastra. Thus *Yellamma* cult in these areas and *Devadasi* system in these areas and in many areas of Karnataka are interrelated. *Devadasi* system, prostitution or sex work thus is connected with the *Yellamma* cult in a peculiar way.

## VI. Historical and Cultural Background of Yellamma Cult and Prostitution

The famous temple of *Yellamma* in Soundatti at Belgaum district in Karnataka deals with this cult and *Devadasi* system. According to history, Soundatti is a place ruled by a king belonged to Jaina sect. Before their rule this was under the local chiefs where worshipping *Yellamma* as their mother goddess and there Virgin women were appointed as the priests. Later by 8th century, when Jaina kingdom took over the rule, they started enrolling nuns to do rituals in this temple. But in 9th century, when this kingdom lost its power and power in the religion too, the *Saktas* took over the shrine of *Yellamma* once again. In 10th and 11th centuries, *Saiva* kings belonged to *Kapalika* sect got control over this area. During this time, female priests were replaced by male priests who also belonged to *Kapalika* sect. They started indulging and using earlier women priests of the shrine for sex.[vii] In 12th century when *Virasaivism* became dominant and these priests were replaced by *Jangama* priests.[viii] When *Virasaivas* got the power over here, they banned all the ill practices and introduced more refined rituals and belief systems.

During the late 12th century, *Virasaivism* started declining owing to religious revolt in it. Politically also Soundatti area came under the Vijayanagara rulers who were basically *Vaisnavites*. They again converted this shrine in a *Vaisnava* one by appointing Brahmana priests there. These priests installed the idols of *Vaisnava* gods such as *Jamadagni*, *Dattatreya* and *Parasurama*. Various myths were developed both to support their faith and to weaken the earlier deity and tradition also. However till the end of 15th century they continued the administration of the temple and responsibilities towards the devotees. At the beginning of 16th century, once again this shrine came under the local rulers and they slowly started appointing the persons of lower castes as the priests of the temple. They were also known as Joiggayya and *Joggamma*, who were the worshippers of goddess *Bhavani*. They made donations and offered protection to the shrine. It was during that period, attempts were made by Brahmanical priests to take over the temple from non Brahmanical priests. But as already noted, they just succeeded in installing and doing offerings to the idols of *Parasurama*, *Dattatreya*. They even installed *Laksmi* too. During this time *Yellamma*'s names changed as *Renuka*. It is also notable that many local myths are similar to *Renuka*'s myth as narratives in the Puranas. The myths were incorporated with the minor or local myths of *Yellamma* to make the *Yellamma* as same as *Renuka* itself.[ix]

There are some hints about the connection of prostitution with *Yellamma* cult. But a careful analysis is needful to fine out the fact. *Yellamma* became free from skin disease because of serving *Ekayya* and *Jogayya*. She also became a person having the same value as those holy persons. She also took a few women into her service, who had vowed to serve her by spreading her glory and collecting people to serve them. After Yellama's death may be she too became holy person and all believed that any vows taken in her name can solve the problems including diseases on humans. There are several types of mendicants attached to the shrine of *Yellamma*. They are male, female and both young and old ones. They are known to be *Yallappa* or *Yallavva*. Their main job is to spread the glory of *Yellamma*. They carry with them a few objects such as *Chowri* (bunch of hair), metal pot, basket, image of the deity etc. Also they took many vows which can be called as custom and not as tradition. Vows mainly contain three elements. They are praying to the deity to avoid or overcome difficulties or to grant a boon, promising the deity to offer something in return and fulfillment of vows. These vows can be again divided into two types, those involving offerings or gifts and those involving the punishment of the deity. The former is again divided into two those having permanent nature and having temporary nature. In this type of offering any gifts, offering girl to the deity also is included.

## VII. Dedication to Divine Prostitution

By doing a vow to *Yellamma* the initiation of dedication starts. Sometime parents of an unborn child also decide to offer the baby to *Yellamma* after birth if that baby is female child as a divine prostitute. When one girl is dedicated to the shrine of *Yellamma* after many religious rituals, she is sent to a man who is waiting for her in the shrine of the temple for union. It is believed that from that day the family which has gifted the girl to the deity starts getting the grace of the deity and prosperity. The duration of this so called relationship depends on the person and the family. These are agreed by both the parties and the payments are also made. Few girls live with that man as 'wife' for life and others live together for a short duration, ranging from one night to a week, and at the most one month. Like this the life of the dedicated woman called as the divine prostitute continues. But the condition put forward is that woman has to observe mourning while she drops a man or is dropped by a man every time. According to the tradition, widowhood is being followed by her till she gets another man has her 'husband'. The thing is that for every rite, right from the initiation after dedication for every religious action or things done by this woman, the place of Sthanika[x] is must. Since their faith is unwavering, they observe these rites strictly and in the meantime, the priests and the Sthanika at the temple get their share of income also.

## VIII. Different Types of Divine Prostitution

The main identity of the divine prostitutes is the necklace of beads they wear. *Gati Muttu*, *Sule Muttu* and *Jogati Muttu* are the three types. These represents three sections of prostitutes dedicated virgin, active living with a sigh and enjoying sexually pleasures and retired inactive sexually and active ritually. There

is yet another type of classification is of this type. Those wearing *Gati Muttu* type, by rule remain virgin offering their virginity to the deity, these woman are both sexually functional sometime. These groups sometimes after the vowed period undergo another ritual and go as sex partners of men who help them perform to the shrine and consummation rites and make payments to the shrine and the priests. Those who go as commercial prostitutes, undergo the initiation rite of the order of wearing *Sule Muttu* type. The dedication rites and offerings to the deity are the same in both cases. In the case those wearing the *Jogathi Muttu*, are religious mendicants. They constitute several types of men and women who are sexually a functional are also directly initiated into the service of the deity as religious mendicant functionaries. In addition to these categories there are also few men and women who belong to this tradition transact, wear the dress of opposite sex, i.e. men wearing the women's dress. They are also called as *Yellavva* and *Yellappa*. Perhaps this may be started when the female priests were replaced by the male priests, and due to pressure of the locals; this practice was followed by the male priests to influence the local devotees. As every Dasas these people also spread the glory of *Yellamma* by dancing and singing various traditional and folk songs related to *Yellamma* or *Renuka* and thus collecting money for running their life.

The other thing to be noted here is the prostitution came to be called as a divine one and it even becomes a religious practice. Though this was practiced a religious one, later this became a custom among the *Devadasi* group who were mostly from Mahar, Mang Dowani and Chambhar caste groups.[xi] This thus became a way of income for many families. The families trapped by poverty and often depended on this income supplied by their daughters. Girls dedicated to the goddess not only due to the request or command of rich people but due to number of reasons such as lack of male children in a family, increase number of daughters, mother being in the same profession, elder sister or any other member of the family often being a *Devadasi*, manifestation of 'signs' such as *Jata*, dry hair, white patch, leprosy and even mental problems have been traditionally interpreted as signs of the call of the goddess *Yellamma* to join her. It is also told that some families for gaining religious sanction for their need of desire of profit from their daughters earning as a prostitute make these signs artificially.[xii] The above mentioned dedication ceremony is financed by a wealthy man and after attainment of puberty this same man has the right to take that dedicated girl. This man pays a lump of money to the girl's family as long as she continues her work as *Devadasi*. A family of one *Devadasi* also receives gifts presents and cash on those days, which are especially dedicated to *Yellamma* from those who worship this goddess. There is another practice known as *Jogin* system in which a girl before puberty are married to the goddess and enter prostitution when they reach puberty. In the *Basavi* system, the girls are dedicated at pre puberty age to a number of deities. But these girls after attaining puberty, does not immediately enter into life careers as prostitutes and according to tradition by using begging baskets should beg for money and other things to serve *Yellamma* at least twice a week. Basavis usually turn to prostitution as begging does not usually generate sufficient income to them.[xiii]

The social need was of the emergence of the decadent *Devadasi* cult, a week remains of the young girls termed as Matangi, those were dedicated to the king, as the human god, and were believed to be endowed with miraculous power. These girls now dedicated to the goddesses got *Yellamma* as their goal and prototype. The goddess having head only and the goddess having the body is identified with *Renuka*. On the baisis of the popular myth of the latter's severed head, the *Devadasi* softly came to be associated with *Renuka*. The girls dedicated to *Yellamma* carried in their baskets the images of *Parasurama* and *Renuka* too. This shows how *Renuka* got to be associated with the customs which were, originally observed for the southern goddess *Yellamma*. A social custom was thus transformed into divine in nature and even as a religious practice of several communities which has to be done strictly. The prostitution here is changed into 'divine' and thus becomes a practice having divinity in it. This system that has existed throughout several places is recorded in the history of south India and entire culture. This system of divine prostitution can be said larger than the *Devadasi* system, because this kind of custom was functioning within the structure of a region and as a temple ritual. Even though this tradition has lost its socioeconomic base, the concept and thus the need of a divine prostitute is still very much alive.

The identification of *Yellamma* with *Renuka* can be formed in all these instances. The association of practices in connection with *Yellamma* to *Renuka* was naturally the next step. But we have also myths, originally in respect of *Yellamma* inserted onto *Renuka*. Thus it can be concluded that *Renuka* whose glories are mentioned in Mahabharata and many Puranas changes her identity into many goddesses and her identity is shared by these local goddesses for their influence among the locals. It is also possible that by incorporating *Renuka*'s myth to various minor myths of local deities, the myth makers made use of them to establish *Renuka*'s myth through the local divinities of a particular region.

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## Notes

[i] The Gods like Visnu and Siva in Hindu religion are here called as 'great' gods, because they obtain such place in the Hindu community.
[ii] Ramachandra Shastri Pandey (ed.), *Mahabharata, Anusasanaparva*, 95.18.96.8, Gita Press, Gorakhpur, 1998.
[iii] *ibid. Vanaparva*, 116.
[iv] N D Kambale, *The cult of Yellamma or Renuka*, dspace.vidyanidhi.org.

[v] Mang is a tribal community in Maharastra region, Edgar Thurston, *Castes and tribes of Southern India*, Asia Educational Service, New Delhi, 2001, pp.159, 222, 238,292, 386.
[vi] S., Charsley, www.simoncharsley.com, Madiga and Dalit: The *Yellamma* Cult.
[vii] It is also told that more than these practices, offering of blood, alcohol etc., were also dedicated to the goddesses during the time when Kapalika were priests of this temple.
[viii] Jangamas are Virasaivite order men wandering place to place. They had the place of Guru among ht Virasaiva people.
[ix] *Yellamma* was a daughter of a rich man staying near a hill. As she grew into youth, she got affected with skin disease. Once went to place where there were the Padukas of Ekayya and Jogayya are installed. As she did penance there, her skin disease got completely cured. This myth is popular among the Virasaivas. From this time, *Yellamma* was also worshipped by the devotees who arrived to the holy place of Ekayya and Joggayya. Here the local myth told now is changed like this. Renuka got skin disease because she viewed *Gandharva* sporting in the water and due to this she lost her chastity and got skin disease. Wandering here and there, she saw Aswini Devatas the twin physicians and they after seeing her, got back her to charm and they as usual the story of beheading and all follows.
[x] Sthanika means governor or tax collector of a place. Historians tell than the Tulu Brahmins are also called as Sthanikas. It is also historically proved that these persons were appointed as the chief managers of the *Yellamma* shrine also to claim the benefits from that temple. Nagendra singh, *Divine Prostitution*, APH Publishig Corporation, New Delhi, 1997, pp, 95, 96.
[xi] Nicholas J. Bradford, Transgenderism and the Cult of *Yellamma*: Heat, Sex, and Sickness in South Indian Ritual, Journal of Anthropological Research, Vol. 39, New Mexico, 1983, pp.307- 332.
[xii] Mohan Giri, *Kanya Exposition of Little Angels*, Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi, 1999, pp. 35-38.
[xiii] *ibid*, p.38.

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